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Scale How, Ambleside, UK, 2009

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DUTIES OF PARENTS IN RESPECT TO EDUCATION.*

BY M. C. MARCEL, KNT. LEG. HON., *French Consul.*

"Mothers and schoolmasters plant the seeds of nearly all the good and evil that exist in our world; the reformation of education must, therefore, be commenced in nurseries and schools."—DR. RUSH, *American Annals of Education.*

IN the acquisition of knowledge, and of foreign languages in particular, a young learner requires aid and direction. His improvement depends not so much on his intellectual capacity as on his parents, his teacher, and the method which he pursues: the parent gives the first impulse to the moral and mental energies of the child; the teacher guides through the course, and the method is, as it were, the manual of instruction. These three great agents of education act equally important parts. Educational reform must be commenced by them.

Parents lay the first stone in the edifice of education; no office, therefore, is more important than theirs. The legislator may enact laws to punish crimes; he may enforce duty by the dread of punishment; but the parent prevents the commission of crimes by an early cultivation of conscience, the direction of the will, and the formation of moral habits: he teaches the practice of virtue for its own sake. The clergyman may, at the last hour, offer us the consolations of religion; but the parent enforces religious duties by early habits, and effectively prepares us for eternity by laying the seeds of a virtuous life.

The skill of the teacher and the excellence of the method will be of little avail, if the pupil fail in the proper dispositions to study. These deficiencies, unfortunately too prevalent among young people, are often the fatal consequences of the

* We have received the above article from M. G. Théodore, ancien chef d'Institution, Lauréat de l'Académie française, Rédacteur de *Journaux Pédagogiques français et étrangers.*

carelessness of parents who, from ignorance or thoughtlessness, shamefully neglect the education of their children. When bad habits have been early acquired, it is doubtful whether an instructor can ever eradicate them. Besides, it is doing him an injustice to multiply the difficulties of his task. How can he effectually teach his pupils, while his attention is engaged in endeavouring to do away with the evil effects of parental negligence?

There would be little need of coercion at school if the child, by a judicious, moral, and religious education at home, were inspired with that eager taste for useful knowledge which cheerfully encounters difficulties; that filial affection which seeks to gratify the anxious wishes of parents; that respect for masters which prompts to obedience; that love of truth which abhors the idea of imposing on those who confide in him.

Most parents abandon to chance the early training of their children. Many, even, are under the impression that nothing can be done towards the education of an infant. This is a most pernicious error. If parents do not properly direct his first inclinations, he will imbibe those which chance throws in his way; he will be educated by circumstances; for there is no avoiding education: it unceasingly goes on from the moment of birth to the last stage of life. But that which is received in childhood is the most important in its consequences. Habits of order, truth, and industry in the child will make the prudent, honourable, and useful man.

Before the child has articulated a word, he has laid up thoughts and formed habits of feeling which may exert a controlling influence on his scholastic pursuits—nay, on his whole life. Every expression of countenance caught by his eye, every tone of voice which strikes his ear, every action performed in his presence, every emotion, every passion exhibited by those who approach him, educates him, affects his character and future destiny.

It is never too late to begin any study, to acquire any particular information: at any age at which mental culture commences it will be productive of beneficial results; but the seeds of morality, piety, and conscientiousness, cannot be sown too early. Dispositions to what is good and useful ought to begin in infancy, ought to be second nature to the

child. Moral education is, in most cases, hopeless, if it is put off until after the period of childhood.

Parents owe to their offspring what is more valuable than life, that which makes life a blessing, and, in fact, gives life to life itself—a religious and moral education. The harmony of the moral development, which it is in their power to effect, will prepare for the mental training of their children by an irresistible, although mysterious influence. Teachers will make them learned the more easily, if parents make them virtuous; the precepts taught at school will be the better understood, and the more effectually, if in the family circle nothing be witnessed or practised but what is right; whereas all the principles of morality imparted by books or teachers will be unprofitable if evil habits are fostered at home.

The first step in the educational course is conformable to the manifest design of the Creator. The double process—*example* and *practice*—by which it can be accomplished, is equally in conformity with the dictates of nature. In order that virtues and moral feelings be inculcated in children, they must be practised before their eyes; and, in the absence of the circumstances which give rise to them, they must be presented to their imagination by natural and simple narratives, taken as much as possible from the realities of life. But it is not enough to set them the example, and present them with illustrations of piety, justice, goodness, and wisdom; the parents must also train their offspring to the practice of these moral acquirements. Exercise, confirmed into habit, is the true way of establishing the virtuous character.

When we wish to train the muscles to the performance of any particular art, or the intellectual powers to the knowledge of any particular science, we are not satisfied with merely giving precepts and directions; our chief attention is employed in making the muscles and the faculties go through the necessary exercises, until, by frequent repetition and correction, they acquire the requisite rapidity and precision. On the same principle, if the aim of the parent be to develop a moral sentiment, he must make his child go through the exercises which render it habitual, and not be content with teaching precepts which are addressed to the understanding alone, and which, therefore, might be learned with the greatest accuracy,

without necessarily imparting even a shadow of increased vigour to the moral faculty.

It were to be wished that parents knew the nature and importance of the care which their children claim before being placed in the hands of instructors. They should watch the gradual development of their faculties, afford these faculties scope for action, and direct them to a useful and virtuous end. They are bound to keep up their natural inquisitiveness, to open their minds to the elements of knowledge, to cherish in their hearts regard and gratitude towards their instructors, and to imbue them with those moral and religious feelings without which mental powers and extensive knowledge are rather a calamity to themselves and to society. Unless love of knowledge, habits of obedience, industry, self-improvement, and the other moral qualities requisite for learning have been early formed, and unless they are kept alive and increased by parental co-operation, teachers will labour in vain when they attempt to impart instruction to their pupils.

Many parents, absorbed in the business of life or given up to its pleasures, cannot find leisure to discharge this most important of their duties. Unable to attend to children, or anxious to get rid of their noisy sport, they hurry them to school, to which they carry all the vices of early miseducation. There is a general feeling amongst parents that the worse and the more troublesome their sons are, the more is a public school a fit place for them. The great end of such establishments is, in their opinion, to flog out the vicious habits which they have allowed their children to form; and thus must the instructor, in spite of himself, exchange his noble office for that of an executioner. How many unfortunate little creatures have thus cruelly suffered for the faults and ignorance of their imprudent parents!

Here we cannot refrain from remarking that much thoughtlessness and inconsistency is exhibited by many English and Irish parents on this point; they are human, to their horses, and devoid of compassion for their offspring. The same man, who, on lending a favourite nag to a friend, entreats him to use the whip and spur very sparingly, will, on delivering up his child to a schoolmaster, not unfrequently recommend him not to spare the rod. The laws forbid ill-treatment to

animals, and sanction the brutalising of delicate youth both in schools and factories. The people have, in general, that self-respect which becomes freemen; and yet they bring up in the debasing habit of being horse-whipped those on whom devolves the right of maintaining the family dignity; they make cowards of them by constant appeals to bodily fear. To complete the inconsistency, the scions of British aristocracy are sent to high schools, where, under the odious and degrading system of fagging, they alternately practise meanness and tyranny.*

* "To the fagging system, we think, is mainly attributable the want of independence, both politically and in private life, which has characterised too many of our countrymen—a servility without an object, an unmeaning, unaccountable subserviency to the will and caprice of others."

Journal of Education, No. XVII., p. 88.

THE UNCONQUERABLE SOUL.*

ROBERT BROWNING.

(Continued from page 352.)

BUT it is not only despair of life, and what it means and what it brings, that the poet had around him in the formative years of his life. In the great new world of physical science just opening, in the extraordinary changes produced by new inventions and manufactures, life seemed to alter its conditions, and those who lived in the earlier stages of these changes could hardly realise their meaning. It is natural that at first the power of these material things in this life was over-valued, and that there were hopes of a golden age introduced by mechanical progress. It needed time to realise that the power to create by the million, absolutely unnecessary and often hideous articles, would not contribute to general happiness, but rather become an additional burden, intensifying the scramble for money and add a fresh perplexity to the adjustment of social relations. Had Sir Thomas More dreamt of modern wonders when he conceived his Utopia, he would have imagined this facility of manufacture as a contribution to the world's leisure and general relief from excessive toil; this facility of distribution as a solution of the problem how to let every man share in the plenty of happier districts. He could not, I think, have pictured to himself, cartloads of fish rotting in Billingsgate while the poor next door to it starved for want of cheap food, nor miles of cloth issuing daily from the looms and yet the naked going unclothed; nor superfluous possessions overloading the lives of men, making it hard to distinguish the essentials of life from its accidents.

Materialism is an ancient enemy, but it gained fresh force under new conditions. In administering to refinement, in opening out treasures of knowledge and art, it seemed rather to be endowing the soul with wings than weighting her to the ground, and so, unconsciously as it were, the new conditions fostered a strong tendency to measure everything by its material results, whether the empire, by its acquisition of square miles, or a life by the millions bequeathed in the will—